

Henry Phankouth, Archdeacon of Shetland (1502-1529)



Site of the tithe barn



Kebister Ness, Shetland Islands

At an archaeological dig at Kebister, Shetland, between 1985 and 1987 was uncovered a large barn-like structure which proved to be of post-medieval date. During the dig, an elaborately carved armorial stone was also discovered. The heraldic stone [pictured below] displays within an exotic tabernacle a chevron upon which the words 'Sine Paulisper' are cut in relief. These words absurdly portray a slave begging his master for a kiss from his mistress! Is it believed to be based on a quote from a 16th century play by Terence. These discoveries led to the owner of tithe barn, one named Henry Phankouth! an erstwhile Archdeacon of Shetland. The building they adorned may have been a collecting point and temporary store for teinds (tithes) and rents delivered to the archdeacon in kind. But who was Henry Phankouth and how did he get that peculiarly un-Scottish name?

Andrew Pictoris, a German academic became Bishop of Orkney in 1477 and his son, Henry Phankouth was probably born about 1470, just after his father arrived in Scotland, Henry's letters of legitimation states he was said to be 'oriundus' or 'sprung from the kingdom of Scotland! Sent to be educated at Cologne University, Henry matriculated in 1488. On his return to Scotland, the diocese of St Andrews ordained him priest following a Papal dispensation on account of his defect of birth. In 1497, Bishop Andrew travelled again to Rome and secured further letters of legitimation for Henry. He was preparing the ground for a job for his son —the lucrative Shetland Archdeaconry which had become vacant along with its official duties within the cathedral. It comprised a large estate in the Shetlands Isles mainly in the most productive parishes. His future seemed assured until a problem arose. It appeared that another candidate for the job, Magnus Herwood, a Dane, which was almost certainly collusion between a powerful local family the Sinclairs, and the Danish Crown who had been persuaded to invite Herwood, a 'family friend' of the Sinclairs, to become Archdeacon. Old political rivalries between the Sinclairs and the Bishop created a storm at the Scottish court, and letters were dispatched to the Sinclairs under pain of a charge of sedition, not to impede Henry Phankouth's entrance to the Archdeaconry. Phankouth acceded to the Archdeaconry in 1502. Although he was based and lived in Orkney, he visited Shetland at irregular intervals as required, probably commissioning the Kebister barn for storing his tithes during his one of his visits to Shetland. "The mystery solved." writes Brian Smith; "we can imagine the bishop's son, a bastard, now legitimate —the second most important official in the diocese, especially given that the bishop was almost always absent — deciding to build an imposing barn in Shetland, decorated with his beautifully carved but bogus arms." The building seems to have been little used probably because of the diminishing importance of the Church after the Reformation, the clergy becoming little more than parish ministers. Henry Phankouth resigned his archdeaconry in 1529 living thereafter in the obscurity of island life. However, we can express curiosity over his name. *Phankouth* can be translated from the German to mean pancake maker or even pancake gorgor!



Arms of Henry Phankouth

Stuart Donald

Acknowledgements to:

Brian Smith, Archivist of Shetland Islands Council who did the original research and published his findings in *The Innes Review* Vol 40 No 2 and for the picture of Phankouth's arms; and to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for use of the picture of the archaeological dig at Kebister; the Kebister Ness picture is from the internet
ask archives about your historical questions at email: abdndioarchives@gmail.com